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ABSTRACT

The English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT) is a multiple-choice examination that is designed to assess the test taker's ability to use English in day-to-day interactions involving listening and reading. It is intended primarily as an admissions and placement test for college students with English as a second language. The ELPT consists of subtests for listening skills and reading skills. Research generally supporting the validity of the ELPT was reviewed, and the external aspects of construct validity were studied with a special data collection and analyses. One set of analyses addressed the relationship of proficiency ratings as made by the ELPT to proficiency ratings made by students' teachers using the same scale descriptors. The second set of analyses investigated the relationship of ELPT scores to college grades assigned in English as a second language courses, regular English classes, and/or freshman grade point average (GPA). Two samples were used, one of 412 high school students from 32 classes and 24 schools and the other of 190 college students from 15 classes over 10 colleges. In the college sample, ELPT reading standard scores correlated 0.50 with teacher ratings of reading proficiency and 0.48 with teachers' relative rankings of reading competence. In the high school sample, comparable correlations were 0.68 and 0.69. In the college sample, the correlation for listening scores was 0.57 with teacher ratings of proficiency and 0.56 with teachers' rankings. In the high school sample, these ratings were 0.71 and 0.67 respectively. For the 2 colleges for which GPA was available, the reading correlation was 0.53 for 1 college, and 0.05 for the other (perhaps a function of small sample size and relatively high reading scores). Results for the listening scale also suggest that the kinds of language skills assessed by the ELPT play some role in overall academic success, but are hardly deterministic of success or failure. Yet to be investigated is whether the absence of writing or speaking components of the ELPT is important in assessing the usefulness of the measure. An appendix defines the reading and listening proficiency scales. (Contains eight tables and two references.) (SLD)

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Validity of the English Language Proficiency Test

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Brent Bridgeman

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The English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT) is a multiple-choice examination that is designed to assess the test taker's ability to use English in day-to-day interactions involving listening and reading. Thus, it emphasizes functional, practical language. It is intended primarily for use as an admissions and placement test in two- and four-year colleges for students with English as a second language. The primary target population is high school students who have lived in the United States for at least two years and who have either come from a country whose primary language is not English or who come from homes where English is not the principal language. It may also be useful for students in English as a second language classes regardless of how long they have been in the United States.

The ELPT consists of two subtests: one attempts to measure listening skills, and the other, reading skills. Each of these two subtests consists of about 42 items which are to be completed in thirty minutes, for a total test time of one hour.

Separately for the listening and reading subtests, the ELPT categorizes students into one of five proficiency levels. These levels are intended to provide descriptions of what students categorized in each level can do. The levels (below intermediate, intermediate, intermediate high, advanced, and advanced high) are defined in the Appendix. In addition, scaled scores are provided. The Reading and Listening scales run from 1 to 50 and the Total scale runs from 901 to 999. (These scales were selected to avoid confusion with the 200-800 scale used to report scores for the SAT I: Reasoning Tests and SAT II: Subject Tests.) In the pamphlet, "Understanding Scores from the English Language Proficiency Test" scaled scores are defined as follows:

For the first edition of the ELPT, the maximum raw score of 84 for the Total score and 42 for each of the subscores were assigned a scaled score of 999 and 50, respectively. Each subsequent raw score was then assigned one less scaled score, so that a Listening raw score of 41 was assigned a scaled score of 49, a raw score of 40 was assigned a scaled score of 48, etc. The second and subsequent editions of the test scores will be equated to the first edition so that the scaled scores reflect the score the student would have received had they taken the first edition of the test.

This paper presents some evidence related to the validity of the ELPT. As Messick (1996, p. 6) has observed, "Validity is an overall evaluative judgment of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the **adequacy** and **appropriateness** of **interpretations** and **actions** based on test scores or other modes of assessment" (bold in the original). Messick focuses on construct validity, noting "score meaning is a **construction** that makes theoretical sense out of both the performance regularities summarized by the score and its pattern of relationships with other variables" (p. 6). Although validity is seen as a unified concept, it is useful to separately consider the six aspects of construct validity identified by Messick; these are content, substantive, structural, generalizability, external, and consequential.

Content

From its inception, the ELPT was designed as a proficiency test; a proficiency scale was NOT simply appended to an existing measure. Thus, such topics as grammar and usage that are frequently found on achievement tests receive much less emphasis on the ELPT which concentrates on assessing practical use of the English language. Test development was driven by contemporary theories of functional language use in both academic and non-academic settings as interpreted by a committee of experts both internal and external to ETS. The external members of the committee included ESL teachers,

college administrators, and college faculty with expertise in the assessment of English for speakers of other languages. These and other external experts who reviewed an early version of the test suggested that more emphasis should be placed on the use of English in academic settings, and these changes were incorporated in the final version of the ELPT.

Substantive

This aspect of construct validity emphasizes the need for assessment tasks to sample domain processes (not just domain content) and to provide evidence that "ostensibly sampled processes are actually engaged by respondents" (Messick, 1996, p. 10). Inspection of the test form suggests that reading and listening processes are indeed engaged by the ELPT. It appears that reading processes must be engaged to answer the reading questions, and listening processes (plus reading processes) must to engaged to answer the listening questions. For one question type in the Listening section (rejoinders), both the question and answer choices are presented on audio tape, and the examinees need only mark the appropriate letter on the answer sheet. For the other question type in the listening section (dialogues), the examinees hear a selection such as a dialogue, an announcement, a news report, or a narrative and then read and answer a multiple-choice question based on the selection that they just heard. As might be expected, scores from the dialogue question type showed a higher correlation with the total reading score (r = .81) than did scores from the rejoinder question type (r = .69). Corrected for unreliability of both the listening and reading scores, these correlations were .92 and .84 respectively.

Additional studies are needed to determine the extent to which apparently necessary skills are actually tapped by the test questions. In particular, future studies should determine whether students can answer the questions without reading the passages or listening to the recordings of the listening tasks.

Structural

Messick (1996) notes that "the internal structure of the assessment (i.e., interrelations among the scored aspects of task and subtask performance) should be consistent with what is known about the internal structure of the construct domain" (p. 11). Based on data from the first operational administration of the ELPT in November of 1995, the coefficient alpha reliability of the Reading score was .91 and the reliability of the Listening score was .89. The correlation of the Reading and Listening scores was .83. Corrected for unreliability, the correlation of the two scores was .91. As expected, reading and listening skills are highly related but the corrected correlation is still less than 1.0. The corrected correlation was somewhat higher than the correlation between similar scores in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in which corrected correlations in the low to mid .80's across five major language groups have been reported (Hale, Rock, & Jirele, 1989). Because students in the ELPT sample resided in the United States for at least two years, they were immersed in both reading and listening tasks and would tend to learn these skills together; the foreign students in the TOEFL sample may experience greater variability in the extent to which reading or listening tasks are emphasized in their academic English programs.

Further evidence of discriminant validity is provided by the correlation of the ELPT scores with the verbal score from the SAT I Reasoning Test (SAT I-V). A major component of the SAT I-V is a reading test, about half of the questions relate to reading passages. There is no listening section. Thus, the ELPT Reading score should be more highly related to SAT I-V than the Listening score. This was the case with correlations with SAT I-V of .75 and .69 for Reading and Listening respectively. Also as should be expected, correlations with the SAT I mathematics score (SAT I-M) were substantially lower (.49 and 48 for Reading and Listening respectively). The ELPT Total score was correlated .76 with SAT I-V and .51 with SAT I-M.

Generalizability and External

"Evidence of ...generalizability depends on the degree of correlation of the assessed tasks with other tasks representing the construct or aspects of the construct" (Messick, 1996, p. 11). Evidence could come from correlations with other multiple-choice assessments in the same domain, but much stronger evidence comes from noting relationships to criterion performances that are measured in quite different ways. With such criteria, the external aspect of construct validity can be subsumed under the same set of analyses. We addressed these issues with a special data collection and analyses that are described below. The first set of analyses addressed the relationship of proficiency ratings as made by the ELPT to proficiency ratings (using the same scale descriptors) made by the students' teachers. The second set of analyses investigated the relationship of ELPT scores to college grades assigned in English as a second language classes, regular English classes, and/or freshman grade point average (GPA). Many factors besides language

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ability influence course grades, thus the correlations for these analyses would be expected to be substantially lower than for the first set analyses in which both predictor and criterion are clearly attempting to assess the same type of language skills and abilities.

Analyses of Teacher Ratings

Sample. Two samples were used, a sample of high school students and a sample of students enrolled in two- or four-year colleges. For both samples, students in English as a second language (ESL) classes were targeted. Recruitment letters were sent to ESL teachers from a regionally and economically diverse set of institutions. Participating teachers agreed to administer the ELPT and to independently rate the listening and reading proficiency of their students. Students who were not in the primary target population for the ELPT were screened from the sample. Because analyses were conducted within classrooms and then averaged across classrooms, classes with fewer than four students meeting the eligibility criteria (in target population, complete ELPT scores, and complete teacher ratings) were eliminated. This resulted in a final sample of 190 college students (from 15 classes spread over 10 colleges) and 412 high school students (from 32 classes spread over 24 high schools).

Materials. Sample rating sheets, with scale definitions, are provided in Appendix B.

Procedures. Teachers were asked to first complete the Listening Rating Form and then the Reading Rating Form. The teachers were instructed as follows:

> On each form you will do two ratings for each student. The proficiency rating will evaluate your students with respect to a defined standard. The relative

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ranking will evaluate your students with respect to each other. Because the proficiency ratings are on a predefined scale, you may find that you are using some score points more than others or that some score points are not used at all; this is perfectly appropriate. On the other hand, the number of students in each category in the relative rankings should be balanced.

For the proficiency ratings, read over the attached definitions, then circle the letter (or "+" for intermediate high) that corresponds to your evaluation of the student's proficiency.

For the relative rankings, each student you are rating should be compared to the other students you are rating and assigned a rating as top quarter (1/4), second quarter (2/4), third quarter (3/4) or bottom quarter (4/4). Rankings should be relative to the other students your are rating on the **Rating Form**, not relative to all of the other students in your classes (unless all of your students appear on the **Rating Form**). The number of students in each quartile should be as equal as possible....

Because scores are considerably more variable across courses than within courses, and because the ELPT is intended for use in unselected groups (in order to make admissions or placement decisions), within course correlations were corrected for restriction in range. Gulliksen's (1950, p. 137) equation 18 was used, with the standard deviation of scores in the unselected population estimated from the total across course standard deviations for the reading and listening scores (10.1 for reading and 10.8 for listening). These within-course corrected correlations were converted to zs, weighted by

n-3, averaged, and converted back into a correlation coefficient. In addition to these averaged, corrected correlations, crosstabulations of test-assigned and teacher-assigned proficiency ratings were computed.

Results. In the college sample, ELPT reading standard scores correlated .50 with teacher ratings of reading proficiency and .48 with teachers' relative rankings of reading competence. In the high school sample, the comparable correlations were .68 and .69. In the college sample, the correlation for ELPT listening standard scores was .57 with teacher ratings of proficiency and .56 with teachers' rankings. In the high school sample, the correlations were .71 and .67 for proficiency ratings and relative rankings respectively.

The crosstabulations of teacher ratings and ELPT proficiency scores for both reading and listening, separately for the high school and college samples, are presented in Tables 1 to 4. (Ratings of listening proficiency were made first; some teachers did not complete the reading ratings, so sample sizes were slightly higher for the listening ratings.) Because results were quite consistent across both samples and both types of proficiency, we will discuss only Table 4. The clustering of scores along the diagonal confirms the relatively high correlation observed between test scores and teacher ratings, but it is also apparent that teachers generally report higher proficiency levels than the test scores suggest. For example, the test assigns more than three times as many students to the Below Intermediate (L) level than the teachers, and the test assigns almost twice as many to the Intermediate (I) level. Teachers assigned five times as many students to the Advanced High (H) level as the test. There are 140 students along the five cells on the main diagonal of the table, indicating exact agreement between proficiency ratings

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assigned by the test and the teachers. However, just below the main diagonal (indicating teacher ratings that are one category higher than test ratings) there are 204 students in just four cells.

Although these results suggested that cut scores for each proficiency level on the test may be too high, lowering the cut scores was rejected for two reasons. First, trainers who were experienced with teaching language teachers to make proficiency ratings noted that at the initial stages of training naive raters tend to rate about one category too high (Rabiteau, personal communication). The teacher raters in this study were not exposed to any formal training, and had to rely only on the written descriptions of the proficiency categories. Second, a Nedelsky cut score study suggested that the existing cuts were not too high and may even be too low. In the Nedelsky study, five experts (three ETS staff members and two outside linguists) rated each distractor to determine whether a minimally competent student at each proficiency level could eliminate the distractor. The three ETS staff worked together and provided a single consensus rating while the two external consultants both worked independently. Thus, this procedure generated three independent estimates of a cut point for each level on the reading and listening scales. For only one cut point (Advanced High on the reading scale) was any of these three estimates lower than projected from the teacher ratings and most were substantially higher.

Analyses of Course Grades and GPA

Sample. One of the community colleges in the teacher rating sample also provided GPA data. In addition, one four-year college that did not provide teacher ratings supplied grades in regular English courses and GPA. One community college that

provided data in the teacher ratings sample conducted a second round of testing on a different set of students; ESL course grades, but no teacher ratings, were provided for this sample.

Procedures. Teachers provided mid-term grades in the ESL courses or regular English courses. These grades were on an F-A scale with some also containing plusses and minuses. Grades were converted to a 0-4 numerical scale as follows: F = 0.0, D- = .7, D = 1.0, D+ = 1.3, C- = 1.7, C = 2.0, etc. The ELPT was administered in these classes within a few weeks of when the mid-term grades were assigned; teachers did not have access to the ELPT scores before assigning grades. Grades were correlated with ELPT standard score for reading, listening, and total. Correlations were corrected for range restriction on the Reading or Listening scores but not on the criterion scores.

Results. The means, standard deviations, and corrected correlations with English course grades (ESL for College 1 and regular freshman composition for College 2) for the ELPT Reading score are presented in Table 5. The lower correlation observed in College 2 may be a function of both the small sample size and the relatively high Reading scores that may not discriminate well at the upper end. Also note that the data for College 1 is based on the concurrent correlation with grades in an ESL class while College 2 data is based on correlations with grades in an English composition class that is open to all students. Data from additional colleges is needed before these relationships can be well understood.

Table 6 provides comparable data for the ELPT Listening score. Results essentially mirrored the results for the Reading score with a relatively substantial correlation in College 1 and a lower correlation in College 2.

Tables 7 and 8 show the relationships with college GPA for the Reading and Listening scores respectively. These results suggest that the kinds of language skills assessed by the ELPT play some role in overall academic success but they are hardly deterministic of either success or failure.

Consequential

Messick (1996) suggests that the consequential aspect of construct validity "includes evidence and rationales for evaluating the intended and unintended consequences or score interpretation and use in both the short- and long-term, especially those associated with bias in scoring and interpretation, with unfairness in test use, and with positive or negative washback effects on teaching and learning" (p. 12). It is too early to assess the positive or negative washback effects of the ELPT on teaching and learning. Teachers should be surveyed to determine whether they have modified any teaching practices to prepare students for the ELPT. If they have, these practices should be reviewed by experts to identify those which are on balance positive and those which are essentially negative.

Messick warns that construct underrepresentation can threaten the validity of an assessment; this may occur if some important aspect of criterion performance is not included in the assessment. Thus, for example, a language proficiency test that focused solely on reading skills would underrepresent the listening, writing, and speaking skills that

also may be very important aspects of communicative competence. The ELPT does include an assessment of listening skills, but not speaking or writing skills. Information on these skills would need to be obtained from other sources if they are deemed to be a necessary part of a comprehensive assessment. However, in many academic settings, especially in large sections of freshman-level courses, speaking and writing skills may be of only minimal importance. In other courses, these skills may be more critical. Because a test per se is not validated, but rather the use of the test for a particular purpose, the importance of the absence of a speaking or writing component in the ELPT can only be judged in the context of the how the score will be used and what additional evidence might be submitted along with the ELPT scores.

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References

Hale, G. A., Rock, D. A., Jirele, T. (1989). Confirmatory factor analysis on the Test of English as a Foreign Language. (TOEFL Research Report No. 32, ETS RR-89-42). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

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TABLE 1

ELPT Reading Proficiency Scores by Teachers Ratings of Reading Proficiency for College Sample

ELPT Reading Proficiency Score		Teacher Rating of Reading Proficiency					Row Total
		H	A	+	I	L	
Advanced High	(H)	1	2	0	0	0	3
Advanced	(A)	4	6	3	0	0	13
Intermediate High	(+)	14	34	19	9	2	78
Intermediate	(I)	8	20	30	19	5	82
Below Intermediate	(L)	0	6	8	11	4	29
Column Total	27	27	68	60	39	11	205

TABLE 2

ELPT Reading Proficiency Scores by Teachers Ratings of Reading Proficiency for High School Sample

ELPT Reading Proficiency Score		Teacher Rating of Reading Proficiency					Row Total
		H	A	+	I	L	
Advanced High	(H)	5	2	0	0	0	7
Advanced	(A)	14	15	4	4	0	37
Intermediate High	(+)	31	72	46	12	1	162
Intermediate	(I)	13	36	76	23	9	157
Below Intermediate	(L)	2	9	44	47	13	115
Column Total		65	134	170	86	23	478

TABLE 3

ELPT Listening Proficiency Scores by Teachers Ratings of Listening Proficiency for College Sample

ELPT Listening Proficiency Score		Teacher Rating of Listening Proficiency					Row Total
		H	A	+	I	L	
Advanced High	(H)	2	2	1	0	0	5
Advanced	(A)	11	11	5	0	0	27
Intermediate High	(+)	22	37	25	5	1	90
Intermediate	(I)	11	19	23	17	5	75
Below Intermediate	(L)	1	1	3	3	2	10
Column Total		47	70	57	25	8	207

TABLE 4

ELPT Listening Proficiency Scores by Teachers Ratings of Listening Proficiency for High School Sample

ELPT Listening Proficiency Score		Teacher Rating of Listening Proficiency					Row Total
		H	A	+	I	L	
Advanced High	(H)	7	5	2	0	0	14
Advanced	(A)	25	24	12	1	0	62
Intermediate High	(+)	39	74	49	14	1	177
Intermediate	(I)	4	37	72	51	11	175
Below Intermediate	(L)	0	7	24	33	9	73
Column Total		75	147	159	99	21	501

TABLE 5

Reading Score Means, SDs, and Corrected Correlations with Course Grades

College	*n*	*M*	*SD*	Corrected Correlation with Course Grade
1	113	32.7	5.9	.53
2	18	39.4	4.8	.05

Note.—College 1 is a community college. Grades are for an ESL course ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.0$). College 2 is a four-year college. Grades are for a regular freshman composition course ($M = 3.3$, $SD = .84$).

TABLE 6

Listening Score Means, SDs, and Corrected Correlations with Course Grades

College	*n*	*M*	*SD*	Corrected Correlation with Course Grade
1	113	28.5	6.5	.49
2	18	41.8	3.2	.24

Note.–College 1 is a community college. Grades are for an ESL course ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.0$). College 2 is a four-year college. Grades are for a regular freshman composition course ($M = 3.3$, $SD = .84$).

TABLE 7

Reading Score Means, SDs, and Corrected Correlations with GPA

College	*n*	*M*	*SD*	Corrected Correlation with GPA
2	26	36.5	6.2	.17
3	38	24.7	7.9	.67

Note.--College 2 is same four-year college as in Tables 5-6; *n* is larger because not all students had grades in English composition course. GPA $M = 3.1$, $SD = .73$. College 3 is a community college. GPA $M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.3$.

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TABLE 8

Listening Score Means, SDs, and Corrected Correlations with GPA

College	*n*	*M*	*SD*	Corrected Correlation with GPA
2	26	40.2	4.0	.48
3	38	26.9	8.9	.51

Note.–College 2 is same four-year college as in Table 5-6; *n* is larger because not all students had grades in English composition course. GPA $M = 3.1$, $SD = .73$. College 3 is a community college. GPA $M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.3$.

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Appendix

Definition of Listening and Reading Proficiency Scales

Definition of the Reading Proficiency Scale

Summary of Alpha Codes

H	Advanced High
A	Advanced
+	Intermediate High
I	Intermediate
L	Below Intermediate

Descriptions

H Advanced High

Able to understand texts which are abstract and complex, such as technical reports, as well as texts that treat unfamiliar topics and situations. Able to comprehend facts and make appropriate inferences as well as understand aspects of the target language culture. There is an emerging awareness of the aesthetic properties of language and of its literary styles. There may be some misunderstanding of highly colloquial or technical language.

A Advanced

Able to read prose that is several paragraphs in length, containing predominantly familiar sentence patterns that may refer to a variety of chronological time frames. Reader interprets the main ideas and facts and misses some details. Reading materials include descriptions and narrations such as simple short stories, news items, bibliographical information, social notices, personal letters, routine business correspondence and simple technical texts written for the general reader.

+ Intermediate High

Able to read simple connected texts with consistently full understanding when they deal with basic personal and social needs about which the reader has interest and/or knowledge. Reading materials include descriptions and narrations, social correspondence, and simple academic texts. Basic grammatical relations may be misinterpreted and temporal references may rely primarily on lexical terms.

I Intermediate

Able to understand main ideas and some facts from the simplest connected texts dealing with personal and social needs. Texts have clear underlying internal structure. Reading materials include messages, public announcements and instructions intended for a wide audience, and short descriptions of persons, places and things. Some misunderstandings will occur.

L Below Intermediate

Able to interpret some written language in areas of practical needs. Can identify isolated words, phrases or expressions, such as some items on menus, schedules, signs, etc. when they are highly contextualized. At times, may be able to derive meaning from materials at a slightly higher level where context and/or background knowledge are supportive. Misunderstandings are frequent.

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Definition of the Listening Proficiency Scale

Summary of Alpha Codes

H	Advanced High
A	Advanced
+	Intermediate High
I	Intermediate
L	Below Intermediate

Descriptions

H Advanced High

Able to understand the main ideas and supporting information of most speech in standard dialect, but may not be able to sustain comprehension of complex discourse dealing with unfamiliar or abstract topics, such as technical and academic reports and philosophical discussions. Listener shows an emerging to fully competent awareness of culturally implied meanings.

A Advanced

Able to understand main ideas and most details on a variety of topics beyond the immediate situation. Comprehension may be uneven. Text types include descriptions and narrations in different time frames, interviews, short lectures on familiar topics, news items and reports dealing with factual information. Listener may not be able to completely follow the sequence of ideas in an oral text.

+ Intermediate High

Able to sustain understanding over longer stretches of discourse on a number of topics pertaining to different times and places. Comprehension is inconsistent due to failure to grasp all main ideas and/or details. Text types include interviews, short lectures, news items and reports dealing with familiar topics, but comprehension is less in quantity and poorer in quality than for the Advanced listener.

I Intermediate

Able to understand sentence-length utterances in limited content areas (basic personal background and needs, social conventions, and routine tasks such as getting meals, receiving simple instructions and directions, lodging, transportation, shopping, personal interests and activities). Text types include face-to-face conversations, telephone messages, simple announcements and reports over the media, etc. Understanding is uneven; comprehension breaks down in longer discourse.

L Below Intermediate

Able to understand isolated words, and short, learned phrases reflecting high-frequency social conventions, simple questions, statements and commands that refer to personal information and/or the immediate physical setting. May understand some main ideas of simple discourse.

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